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ABSTRACT

The aged are generally identified by such criteria as chronological age, economic condition, physical appearance, psychological behavior, mental conditions, and social roles. While the present population of aged is characterized by lower educational and economic levels, it is anticipated that as the number of aged grows, the educational and economic levels will increase. Most aged today are not poor, are in reasonable health, and live in urban areas. In terms of their mental abilities, researchers have found that crystalized intelligence remains constant, while fluid intelligence declines. One reason contributing toward the negative stereotype of the aged is the fact that most research has been focused on problems encountered by the aged. Education is one of the more positive aspects of aging. Recently, more attention has been given to educational gerontology. The focus of adult education is on problem finding and solving. Life problems found in later adulthood can provide topics that interest older adults and that they will probably seek in learning experiences. Recommended instructional techniques include ample mastery time, material repetition, positive reinforcement, short-term goal setting, and provision for learners with visual or auditory defects. Suggested types of discussion of reading materials are meta-cognitive, strategy, and postreading. (YLB)

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DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR OLDER ADULTS

A paper presented at the Conference of the
Association of Teacher Educators

Atlanta, Georgia, February 24, 1986

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ADVANCE ORGANIZER

Please answer the following questions to yourselves: 1) How old would I think I am if I didn't know how old I was? 2) If my friends didn't know, how old would they think I am? 3) How old am I?

INTRODUCTION

The "non-old" in our society hold prevailingly negative images of old age (Bishop & Krause, 1984). Stereotypic is the view that old age is a time when abilities decline, activities are more restricted, and dependence on others becomes more of a necessity. Commonly believed is that old people have poor memories, cannot think clearly, and undergo a general decline in mental abilities.

Although peak productivity among scholars, scientists, and artists typically occurs before later life, many people continue such activities well into old age (Aiken, 1982). Intelligence testing of older adults presents several problems and research presents a mixed message. While cross-sectional studies indicate a decline in mental abilities starting about age 30, longitudinal studies show little or no decline after early adulthood (Williamson, Munley & Evans, 1980).

Among the specific mental abilities that have shown decline are the ability to understand new ideas, rate of response time, and the memorization of new, more complex information (Lorsbach & Simpson, 1984).

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Stereotypes are categorizations. Most people use categorizations or classifications as if they were real. They then become the basis for human action and reaction. It is indeed unfortunate that the stereotype held by most people about the aged is negative in nature.

It is the purpose of this paper to present briefly relevant information about the aged, in general, and also particularly with regard to learning, and to provide several sets of positive suggestions which can be used in working successfully with them.

ADVANCE ORGANIZER

Please complete the following sentences to yourselves:

01. When I am old, people will...
02. When I think about growing old...
03. The best part of old age...
04. One of the things I dread about growing older...
05. One thing I'd like to know about old age...
06. If I were a teacher trying to help my students understand older adults, I'd include...
07. One thing I can do to help older people is...
08. When I'm old, people who know me will think that I...

WHO ARE THEY?

The aged are generally identified by various criteria which include chronological age(>65), economic condition, physical appearance, psychological behavior, medical conditions and social roles. With increasing frequency, the literature is now addressing the aged in at least two groups: 1) the young old, those who are more healthy and independent in their 60's and 70's, and 2) the oldest old, those over 85, who require considerable care.

The oldest old is the fastest growing age group in America,

increasing 141% between 1960 and 1980, and expected to increase 67% by the year 2000 to number some 10.1 million (Torrey, 1984).

While the present population of aged (>65CA) is characterized by lower educational and economic levels, it is anticipated that as the number of aged grows, the educational and economic levels will increase. Most aged today, however, are not poor, are in reasonable health and live in urban areas. There are more women and Whites among the aged, only 20% have severe medical problems, some 15% suffer from some sort of psychological disorder, but only 5% are institutionalized.

The "Graying of America" is evidenced by the rise in the median age from CA23 in 1900 to CA30 in 1980 and is predicted to be CA35 in the year 2000.

In terms of mental abilities of the aged, Horn and Donaldson, and Cattell (1976, 1965) found distinction between a decline in crystallized and fluid intelligence. Crystallized intelligence, verbal, over-learned abilities, learned over a period of years and related to education remains constant; while fluid intelligence, non-verbal, ability to deal with the abstract, declines.

While geriatric research and practice dealing with the physical aspects of aging has been developing for some time, gerontological research and practice which deals not only with the physical, but psychological and sociological aspects as well, is only now beginning to develop and have an effect on educational practices employed with the aged.

One reason contributing towards the negative stereotype of the aged is the fact that most of the research has been focused on problems encountered by the aged. Much research and many programs are

sponsored with funds from various agencies, institutions and the government. These sources provide research and development funds to be used in solving problems. Since this work, then, is problem-driven, it has not been directed from a positive view of aging. Therefore, little support has been available for research and program development which focuses on the more positive aspects of aging (Snider & Houser, 1983).

Education is one of the more positive aspects of aging. Educational gerontology can be defined as the study and practice of instructional training and guidance for and about aged persons. Recently, more attention has been given to educational gerontology for the following reasons:

01. The changing age structure of society,
02. The increase in the educational level of society in general,
03. People seeking education at all points in life,
04. The rapid change in social structure,
05. Career pattern changes (average is 3),
06. The expanding role of women in society, and
07. The changing attitudes towards education.

Education for older persons is based on the premise that adults of all ages need knowledge and/or skills because:

01. Education relates to self-fulfillment,
02. It is necessary to learn to cope with changes in later life,
03. There is a vocational advantage to education, and
04. Through education, the aged will be allowed to continue their contribution to society.

ADVANCE ORGANIZER

Think back for a moment. What do you remember about your very

early years in school? Think about good things and not-so-good things. Do you remember one specific teacher? What do you remember about that teacher? Why do you remember that teacher?

LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR OLDER ADULTS

For children in school, formal education is aimed at preparation for the future. They are grouped by grade and/or subject. The teacher is the dominant figure.

For adults, there is a reciprocal interaction between teacher and learner, they are usually found grouped according to interest, and the focus is on problem-finding and problem-solving.

Life problems found in later adulthood can provide topics in which older adults find interest and will probably seek in learning experiences. According to Knowles(1978), such problems include:

01. Vocation and career

01.01. Adjusting to retirement

01.02. Finding new ways to be useful

01.03. Understanding social security, medicare and welfare

02. Home and family living

02.01. Adjusting to reduced income

02.02. Establishing new living arrangements

02.03. Adjusting to death of spouse

02.04. Learning to live alone

02.05. Relating to grandchildren

02.06. Establishing new intimate relationships

02.07. Putting estate in order

03. Personal Development

03.01. Developing compensatory abilities

03.02. Understanding the aging process

- 03.03. Re-examining values
- 03.04. Keeping future-oriented
- 03.05. Keeping morale up
- 03.06. Keeping up to date
- 03.07. Keeping in touch with young people
- 03.08. Keeping curious
- 03.09. Keeping up personal appearance
- 03.10. Keeping an open mind
- 03.11. Finding a new self-identity
- 03.12. Developing a new time perspective
- 03.13. Preparing for death

Aiken(1982) recommends the following instructional techniques when working with the elderly in teaching-learning situations:

- 01. Provide ample time for learners to master the task,
- 02. Repeat the material to be learned several times if necessary,
- 03. Use much positive reinforcement, providing success experiences as needed,
- 04. Set short-term goals that learners are capable of attaining within a reasonable time period,
- 05. Use shorter practice periods, because of possible fatigue,
- 06. When demonstrating a physical skill, verbalize and have the learners do so also, and
- 07. Be aware of and make provision for learners with visual or auditory defects, i.e. large print, louder speech.

If reading materials are used in the teaching-learning situation, it is suggested that several types of discussions are used:

- 01. Meta-cognitive discussion--prior to reading, in order to help the learner to focus on the topic from the perspective of his/her

experiences,

02. Strategy discussions--at points during the reading, to help the learner connect new information with that previously learned, and

03. Postreading discussion--to assist the learning in drawing inferences about the new information (Hansen & Hubbard, 1984).

Similar suggestions are provided by Spilich (1983) when he calls for the use of "advance organizers," short passages or exercises which precede use of text materials to help "set the stage" for comprehension, and when he advocates the breaking of the text regularly with questions, orienting statements and summaries.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

It has been the purpose of this paper to present relevant information about the aged, with the focus on suggestions that can aid in successful teaching-learning experiences. The period of old age must be viewed and worked with from the perspective of the total life experience of the individual (Blackburn, 1984). This perspective may promote a feeling of satisfaction or a feeling of despair. People who work with the aged and aged people themselves would do well to think like the frail old man who said, "My body doesn't work so well any more, but my mind is still free. And as long as it's free, I want it to soar" (Gold, 1982).

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